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ABSTRACT

A technique for teaching English to English majors in a Taiwan university involves students' oral production of descriptive stories to accompany a piece of classical or folk music. The project provides practice in preparing a report in English, practice in speaking before a group, sensitivity toward and ability to talk about aural stimuli, and expansion of cultural awareness. Preparatory activities include classroom discussion of short pieces of music, some familiar and some unfamiliar. Students then listen, on their own, to a tape recording of another piece of music, and make up a story based on their won feelings about the music, using both narrative and descriptive language skills. Student presentations are made in class, and may be videotaped for future viewing. Post-project discussion can include examination of the record jacket or tape cover. Students can critique each other's projects in small groups, and the teacher can use the videotapes, when available, for more thorough evaluation. It is recommended that English singing not be used, because students may spend too much time trying to decipher words, defeating the assignment's purpose of interpretation. A sample student assignment handout and a form for assessing student music reports are appended. (MSE)

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CREATING MUSIC VIDEOS OF THE MIND

A paper presented at
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Introduction and Rationale

What culture does not express itself with music? As with the visual arts, mankind and music seem always to have had an affinity. Though we may not know the exact nature of the music of the past, tape recorders being a recent invention and notation systems, particularly of more ancient cultures, only giving us an approximation; nevertheless, prehistoric cave paintings do depict musicians, and ancient writings mention music. Perhaps our ancestors imitated the natural sounds around them--the birds and the animals, and expressed their feelings through words or by the sheer range and volume of the human voice.

In an illiterate society, history could be handed down to succeeding generations by pictoral art as well as by stories, oral epics which had some kind of rhythmic structure (making them easier to remember) that were often sung or chanted or recited to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument. Scholars believe this is probably how Beowulf was performed. Western culture and literature, particularly Jewish and Christian religious traditions, would be far poorer without David and his lyre giving us the psalms, which were and still are meant to be sung. Even

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in the mountains of Montenegro in the Balkans today, guslar performers charge admission for concert performances of their chanted epic poems as they accompany themselves on the gusli, a one-stringed instrument.

Yet in our technologically advanced societies of today, we, with all our VCRs and video games, feel far removed from these village poets. But are we? Did you listen to the radio today? How many young people have you seen with their Walkmen these past few days? Aren't they listening to the repetitious chanting of the poets of their own age?

Because we could reproduce sound electronically before we could reproduce images in the same way, the term audio, meaning sound only, was later replaced by video. Technically, video means the visual image only, as the labels on our connecting wires state, but in practice, in everyday conversation, video means image and sound together. No one wants a videocassette recorder that cannot reproduce the sound as well. Once again, the shape of a word has shaped our thinking. Using the term video relegates the audio portion to second best, if remembered at all. A picture alone may be worth a thousand words in some cases, but a few spoken words can make that picture redundant.

So what does all this have to do with language teaching? We teachers tend to be textbook oriented. Have you ever tried teaching a course without a textbook? You may be confident enough with your eclectic approach, but students may panic, particularly our Asian students, who think they need something concrete to memorize in order for learning to take place. Even presenting a listening activity without providing the written

text can cause frustration in those students who have a low tolerance for ambiguity.

So even in listening and speaking classes, which are oral/aural in nature, the visual enters by means of the printed text. Furthermore, because our classes are book oriented, even listening and speaking activities often have text as their stimulus. They may also use line drawings or pictures to elicit language.

Certainly there is nothing wrong with using visual stimuli to promote the production of language. Yet how often do we use audio stimuli for the same purpose? Students are often asked to talk about visual stimuli (aren't most description assignments visual?), yet they may get little practice describing aural stimuli. Maley and Duff (1975, 1979), however, have produced tape recordings of sounds and sound sequences and have suggested very creative ways of using them to elicit student language production. Their ideas can also be applied to the use of music.

When we think of using music in the English language classroom, we may imagine students learning songs for cultural exposure, for grammar practice, or for just plain fun. Music has also been used as background to set a classroom mood. How many of us have taught Jingle Bells or other holiday songs, or have used a song to lighten a mood, reward hard work, or to fill-up those last ten minutes of class?

Children love to sing out, and so do adults. Some of us have even performed songs in languages we do not speak. We can also appreciate music sung in languages we don't understand,

especially if the record jacket gives us the title and general meaning in our own language. After all, just look at how many young people all over the world listen to English songs on their radios without a clue to their meaning.

By taking an aural stimulus--music--and remembering that we can appreciate or enjoy music without understanding the lyrics or knowing the composer's purpose, we arrive at the building blocks for this assignment--using unfamiliar pieces of music in EFL classes to give students a purpose for speaking.

Objectives

This assignment is given in the second semester of the class Oral Training I (conversation) for university English majors in Taiwan as preparation for the course Oral Training II (public speaking) in order to get students used to speaking in front of their classmates without yet having to prepare a formal speech. Previous to this unit by a few weeks, students do a similar activity with pictures as stimulus; each student is given a different picture and the homework is to make up a story that somehow fits in with the picture.

Therefore, as follow-up to the previous assignment, this unit uses tape recordings of various pieces of classical music and international folk music to elicit students' oral production of descriptive stories--imaginary music videos. Objectives include (1) practice in preparing reports in English; (2) practice in speaking English in front of a group; (3) expansion of sensititivy toward and ability to talk about aural stimuli; and (4) expansion of cultural awareness.

Concerning objectives (1) and (2), students studying English should be able to use it to give reports in English for their current or future professions and they should, as educated professionals, be able to express their ideas and opinions clearly before at least a small group of people. Thus for this assignment students must not only create a story or explanation to go with the music, but they must consider how to best present it to the audience. Should I play all the music first, then speak, speak a little, play a little, or use some other sort of order?

The rationale for objective (3) has already been given above. Objective (4) deserves special mention. Citizens of today's world cannot afford to be isolated. Nevertheless, we must not try to change one another, but to understand one another and appreciate our differences. Music offers a simple, painless start. It is often said that music expresses the soul of a people; even without a text we can share a feeling or a mood, particularly with instrumental music. The language teacher's goals need not always be tied to discrete language skills. After all, the culturally sensitive individual is often the better language learner and culture assimilator. If, after the student completes the assignment, he is shown the record/CD jacket or tape notes for his selection, he can follow up on his interest if he likes. At the very least, in the preparation of the assignment he will have spent an hour or more in close relationship to the music of a people he has probably never come into contact with.

This assignment is appropriate for students with a high intermediate ability or higher. Students must have sufficient language skills to create their own stories.

Materials

This assignment requires some work setting up the first time, but your materials can be used over again. At the very least you will need (1) a written copy of the assignment to give to the students (see handout) with your own specifications and procedures on it; (2) a good quality tape player to use for both the preparation and the activity itself (students in the back row should be able to hear it); (3) student access to tape players, either their own or those in your language lab; (4) three or four tape recorded excerpts of music to use in the preparation part of the assignment (and optionally one or more video examples); and (5) an audiocassette tape for each student. Upon each of these tapes you will need to record one piece of music approximately two to three minutes in length. I find classical and international folk music works best with my students. Choosing and recording takes time, but, once done, you can use the tapes many more times. If a student accidently loses or destroys one, you have only lost the cost of the blank tape because it was only a copy.

Procedures

The procedures for this assignment are divided into two parts: the preparation for the activity and the actual activity. In the first part, the teacher does most of the work; in the

second, the students perform.

Preparation. In preparing the students for this assignment you will need to spend at least one hour of classroom time. Students need to have a clear idea of just what is expected of them. The following activities can be used.

(1) If you want to spend more than one hour in preparation, if your class is of a lower level of language ability and if you have the time, you may want to begin with one or more of the activities given by Maley and Duff (1975, 1979) in Sounds Interesting or Sounds Intriguing. You can use their series of sound sequences to sensitize students into paying attention to sounds and to assign meanings to them. Students can write a paragraph or discuss among each other what they think the sounds in sequence mean. They start making up their own stories; there are no right answers, just different interpretations.

(2) If you skip (1), you can begin the assignment by playing a short piece of familiar music to the class and asking them what it makes them think of. The fanfare in the middle of Rossini's "Overture to William Tell" works well. Students in Taiwan immediately say "the news" because some radio stations use it before they present the news on the hour. Students from Hong Kong say "horse races" because it is used in advertising that popular activity there. If you play a little more of the piece, most students will say "horses" or "cowboys", associating the music with TV programs and movies. An American teacher would reminisce and tell students how most Americans associate the piece with the old TV cowboy program from the 1950s "The Lone

Ranger"; it was the program's theme song.

It is probably best to include one or two more excerpts, another familiar piece and an unfamiliar one. Each time, ask the students to be more specific. For example, if a student says "people are walking", you can ask "How many people? How old are they? How are they dressed? How are they walking? Fast? Slowly? Where are they going? Where is this scene taking place? When? What time of the day? In the past, present, or future?" I have used Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries", which was also used in the film Star Wars. With this one, some students see marching or fighting. With a Strauss waltz, females might see a beautiful princess at a formal ball. You could have each student write a paragraph for one of these.

(3) Here is another optional activity. If you have a short scene from a TV program or movie where the music and action seem to go well together, you could play just the music first and ask the students to set the scene they see. Ask a few students to share their ideas with the class. Then show the film excerpt to see what the director did. Remember to stress that there is no right answer, just different interpretations. You might choose an action or adventure film or a cartoon. Another possibility would be an excerpt (3 minutes or so) from a silent film, such as one of the Charlie Chaplin films, or "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" scene from the Disney film Fantasia.

(4) Give the students (a) the assignment sheet and (b) the audio-cassette tapes. Explain the assignment sheet, telling students the exact procedure the day they present their stories, when the assignment is due, approximate length of their story,

and so on, and ask if they have questions. Tell them where they can borrow or use a tape player if they do not have access to their own or a roommate's. Remind them to return your tapes when they are finished with them. In short, set out your housekeeping procedures.

Explain that each student's tape has a different piece of music recorded on it. The music is probably unfamiliar. If there is singing, they will not understand the language, and that's not important. Your examples should have prepared them for this. The student's task is to make up a story that results from his feelings from listening to the music. There is no right or wrong interpretation.

When they listen to thier music, students will picture their own stories in their heads; they will have their own music videos playing in their mind's eye. Remind them that they are the only ones who can see their imagined videos; in order for us to see them, they must use descriptive language to fill in the shapes and colors. For this, they will need to use the rhetorical skills of both narration and description.

(5) After you have done the activity once and have videotaped it, you can use one or more of the best examples to show the students. They will also be able to see what previous students have done successfully, and they will have a clear idea of their task. Here you can point out various ways to present the story, such as playing the whole piece of music first, then speaking; playing a part, speaking, then playing another part; speaking while the music is playing softly in the background; or

some other combination of playing and speaking. They need not even play the entire selection. Students choose their own manner of presentation depending upon the story they create. You have given them the raw material from which they create the finished product. You may also put good examples of previous speeches in your language lab for students to view on their own time.

Student Activity. The time required for the student performance of the activity will depend upon (a) the language ability of the students, since higher level students tend to produce longer stories; and (b) the number of students in the class. With teacher and audience reactions and comments, in my classes the average is five to six speakers per hour.

About the only materials you need for these classes is a tape player. Allow each student a few second before she begins to get acquainted with the controls of that particular machine. Some students may wish to use their own, especially if they have practiced playing times with their own counter (counter times on different machines are not alike, and some have no counters at all). Each student of course brings her own pre-recorded tape that you gave her.

For now, the teacher and the rest of the students can sit back and enjoy the show. You may want to take a few notes in order to comment after each speech, and you will certainly want to share your reactions and solicit those of the other students. You need not give exhaustive comments at this time, especially if your class is large. You will need some sort of evaluation sheet to assign a grade (see Appendix for a detailed example from a public speaking class); you can give students a more exhaustive

written evaluation if you videotape (see Evaluation section below).

During your comments, be sure to tell the students the source of the music; after all, they are curious. Bring in the record jacket or tape cover if you can. Show these to students after they have all finished speaking to prevent distraction while speaking is in progress; if you have a long class with a break, the break time is good because students are free to show each other the CD and tape covers and you can circulate informally and chat with students about their musical selections. Remember, this is not wasted time: if students are chatting with you in English in a non-threatening situation about musical tastes, they are practicing the kind of everyday conversation that goes on in everyday life, where the focus is on content, not on whether the grammar is completely correct.

You may also want to remind students once again that it does not matter whether they guess the music correctly; you are interested in how well they present their own interpretation. When all the students have completed the assignment, you may want to repeat what your objectives were and tell them you hope they have learned to talk about music a little more easily and to appreciate the music of other cultures. And probably you will also thank them for providing you and the class with some very enjoyable stories.

Evaluation

As mentioned above, you will need to evaluate each student's

performance in addition to your classroom comments. You may use the form in the Appendix for public speaking or simplify it to suit your own purposes.

If you want to be more thorough, you can videotape the assignment. Not only do students enjoy seeing themselves on television, but they can also learn by critiquing themselves. If your class is large, you will probably waste too much time having everyone watch all the speeches again. It is more useful and a lot less boring for the teacher and individual students or small groups to watch speeches together. This way there is more time to point out specific points, both good and bad, to hear student reactions, and to suggest how they can improve the next time. You show students what to look for; you teach them how to critique themselves. Because the first time we see ourselves on the TV screen can be a shock, you need to build student confidence, showing them what they can improve. Remember, you must guide them individually the first time in self-criticism, showing them how the technology is not punishing them but giving them concrete means for self-improvement. From my experience, the majority of students do modify their speaking behavior and show positive improvement.

Videotaping has some advantages for the teacher, too: you can enjoy the presentations without spending all your time writing. Later, at your own convenience at home, you can watch the speeches on your own TV one or more times and write thorough evaluations, which you can then go over with individual students as they later watch their speeches. Furthermore, your accumulated tapes can be a source of research data. And the next

time you teach the assignment, you can show the best presentations to your class as examples.

Concluding Remarks

At the end of each semester I give students my own course evaluation form. Each time this assignment was given, student evaluations gave this activity the highest rating. Informally many have told me how much they like it; it is something different from other assignments in other classes. It is fun for the teacher, too.

Moreover, in real life, opportunities for speaking are not all academically oriented. Music is a part of our collective history and also a part of our everyday lives; we should be able to talk about it and express how we feel about it. Although this assignment is not about an academic topic, students need to use the same skills--how to organize a story along with AV equipment while capturing and keeping the interest of the audience. These skills are also necessary in giving any presentation in future employment situations. Furthermore, in all fields we are using AV equipment more and more to enhance our presentations. Our students, too, can learn to use these primarily leisure AV toys to aid in the expression of their ideas.

If you, the teacher, have never particularly cared for music, then you need not do this assignment; we all do better when we do what we enjoy. But if you would like to try it, then start collecting your own music. I use mostly international folk music, since this is my personal interest and I therefore have

many recordings. Classical music would work well; you're welcome to try other kinds. One word of caution: don't use English singing, because some students might spend too much time trying to decipher the words, thereby defeating the purpose of this assignment.

Not all students will like this assignment, either; no assignment ever does please everyone. We all have different interests. Varying assignment types should balance out this natural bias.

My students and I always enjoy creating these music videos in our minds. It is a little out of the ordinary, so it gets out interest. Students have maximum opportunity and flexibility to create and perform using English, and they may even learn something else on the side. If you try it, you and your students will also have some enjoyable and educational experiences.

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STUDENT ASSIGNMENT
CREATING MUSIC VIDEOS OF THE MIND

This assignment is a little different from the ones you have already completed. This time you will tell a story and/or describe a scene. You can think of it as making up a music video in your mind and then telling us about it in English. Remember, we can't see into your head, so you have to describe and explain clearly so that we, too, can see your brain's music video.

You will be given an audio cassette tape upon which is recorded one piece of music of about 3 minutes in length. Each student's tape contains a different piece of music. If there is singing, it is in a language you don't understand. The words aren't important for this assignment. You may listen to the tape as many times as you wish. Here are some questions to ask yourself as you listen.

---What does this music make me think of? A particular place? What place? A certain time period? When? In the past, present, or future?
---Are there people in the scene? How many? What are they doing? How are they dressed?
---What objects or animals are in the scene? What is the background?
---What has happened before this scene?
---What will happen next?
---What is the mood--how does the music make me feel? Happy? Sad? Excited? Peaceful? Scared?

These are only some of the questions you can ask yourself to generate ideas. From these ideas, you will make up your story, putting in as much detail as you can. Use your imagination. Remember, there is no correct story. Everyone's story will be based on his/her own experience.

In the next class, you will tell us your story. Your teacher will bring a tape player to class; you may bring and use your own if it is more convenient for you. Please play the music for us. You may play it first and then speak, or you may combine the music and your story in any way you like (e,g,, play some then speak some, or speak while the music is playing softly). You don't even have to play the whole piece. You decide which way best fits your presentation.

You will be graded on your ability to organize and express your thoughts clearly in English, your ability to narrate the story and give vivid descriptions, and your ability to capture your audience's interest.

Reminder: These are your teacher's personal tapes. Please return the tape after you present your report. If you don't, you'll receive a low grade. If you accidently lose it, replace with a new blank tape and ask for another piece of music for your assignment.

APPENDIX

EVALUATION FORM FOR MUSIC REPORTS*

CONTENT/ORGANIZATION

Introduction (10)_____

Body (25)

organization_____

clarity of narration_____

use of details, descriptive language_____

use of music to enhance story_____

interest_____

Conclusion (10)_____

Sensitivity to Audience (5)_____

PRESENTATION

Linguistic

pronunciation/intonation (10)_____

grammar and word choice (10)_____

fluency/avoidance of hesitations (10)_____

Non-Linguistic (20)

voice quality/volume_____

eye contact_____

gestures_____

manner, posture, appearance_____

COMMENTS:

*This evaluation form may be used when the assignment is given as part of a public speaking class. Teachers will want to modify the criteria and point values to fit in with their own objectives and the level of the class.